

Fall Semester by Luddleston

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Summary:

It's the beginning of freshman year of Zag's second attempt at a college career, and this time he's determined not to fail out and incur the wrath and disappointment of his father.

He's going to need to work hard and stay focused, but there's one major distraction sending him off-track during his morning history lecture. That would be his professor, who just so happens to be the hot guy who's a regular customer at Athena's bookshop, where Zagreus works.

But *god*, what a distraction.

Fall Semester

Author's Note:

- For [honnoujis](#).

This is my second piece for the THIGHexchange! I was so happy to get to work on this, it was a wonderful distraction from Life and I absolutely adore a good warm fuzzy college AU!

Granted, this did go a little off track with regard to Books and the bookshop itself, but if I'm not gonna use the summer I worked at a bookshop as fluffy AU inspiration, what else am I gonna do with it?

— Week 1 —

Having his cousin 'visit him' at work was turning out to be a lot more fun in theory. See, in Zagreus' mind, such an occasion would have been a slow day at the bookshop, maybe while Athena wasn't around, so him and Hermes could just joke around over the weirdest advance reader's copies they could find in the back room or see who could balance the tallest stack of new arrivals as they brought them up from the basement to be shelved.

But no, it was the weekend before the semester started. And the weekend before the semester started was always insane, but in Zagreus' personal opinion, this one was particularly harrowing because he was also *quite anxious, thank you*. Listen. It was Freshman Year, Round Two, trying this again after a whole seven years of no higher education at all, because he could *do* it this time, he had a good therapist and meds that worked when he remembered to take them and, you know, all the pressure of his father saying this was his last chance.

Fail out again, and you'll be done. No more tuition paid for, you come back to the family business and you don't complain.

Right.

As if Zagreus could spend another *second* working for his father's hellhole of a staffing company. If he had to fill out one more I-9 form or drug test one more sad shade of a person it would already be about five too many. T.A.E. Staffing should have had "*abandon hope, all ye who enter here*" printed right under the nameplate on their boring beige office door.

Also, he was technically already working for *a* family business. But working for Athena wouldn't pay his rent (that was Nyx, she paid for him and her sons, although Zagreus hardly saw his roommates, what with law school and Hypnos' weird sleep schedule and Charon's general reclusiveness).

But at least Athena didn't seem to mind when Hermes came around.

In fact, she installed Hermes behind the cash register with Zag, because the crowd was beginning to become somewhat ridiculous. Of course, the start of the semester just *had* to overlap with the newest release of the most popular YA series of the hour. On top of all the students trying to find books that were sold out from the college bookstore, there were also high schoolers swarming the place looking for the next of the *Unbidden* books. Zagreus had meant to read that ARC. He really had. Artemis said it was good, but she'd spoiled the twist: Prince Lux apparently fell in love with the prince of the Underworld.

Zagreus thought the whole plotline about going to the Underworld was a little silly, and had no clue how the author was going to fit in an entire societal structure for the land of the dead in what wasn't really the longest of books, but then again, their forte had never really been world-building. Their forte was making all of the characters hot. He was pretty excited that it had taken an unexpectedly queer turn, though.

So, that was Zag's Saturday. The store was crowded, Zag hadn't had a chance to take a break, and Hermes kept asking him things about the POS so often Zag was pretty sure he would've been slowing things down if he wasn't maniacally fast when he wasn't confused. Athena had taken to standing at the front of the store and asking people if they were looking for *Unbidden* straight off the bat, which was helpful but also meant Zag had to go all the way to the front to find her if he needed her.

"So, how do you like this series?" Hermes was asking the latest girl who'd come up to had come up to him brandishing a copy of *Unbidden: Book 6: Below the Earth*. He said this as if he hadn't had literally the same conversation with every other customer who bought this book, even though this was about the twelfth time Zagreus had heard him say, "I hear it's good, but I've not read a single one of them, myself." Hermes liked to say customer service was only about making everyone *feel* they had a unique experience, but Zagreus wondered what he'd do if he forgot someone's face and accidentally gave them the same line twice.

"I love them," she said, hugging the book to her chest for a moment before remembering he was supposed to be ringing it up and handing it over. "Did you know the author lives around here? I'm so thrilled she's bringing in more of Zed, he's this guy—" she tapped the cover. "Lux is interesting, but he's a bit of an arrogant asshole."

"That's what *I* think!" Zagreus said, suddenly tuning in while he refilled the receipt paper. He looked over the register screen to call out, "*next!*" and then continued. "That underworld guy, though, he's quite a smooth talker for somebody called 'Zed'. It's a silly name, I think."

"Oh, sure, and *Zag* isn't a silly name," Hermes said, rolling his eyes, tucking a bookmark into the girl's copy, and holding it up before putting it in the bag. "He even looks a bit like you."

"I don't see it." Zagreus gave the tired-looking university student a nod and didn't really address them beyond that, which they looked immensely grateful for.

"Come on, the hair!"

"Just because he has *black hair*— his hair is all in his face like—ugh. No. He doesn't look like me. He's got red eyes!"

"Well of course you haven't got red eyes. That would be weird." Hermes presented the girl with her book with a flourish, as Zag finished ringing up that Shakespeare book all the first-level English students kept coming in for.

It was so busy he hadn't even noticed who was next in his line.

The Golden Owl Book Shop had a lot of regular customers, and Zagreus had gotten to know most of them over the year he'd worked there. It was a lot of grandmas who bought their grandkids books for every occasion, schoolteachers who were always looking to expand classroom libraries, and that one guy who wanted every single title related to WWII that they received.

And then there was this guy.

When Zagreus had started working here and had seen him a couple of times but didn't know his name, he referred to him in his mind as Handsome Bookshop Guy. HBG, as it were. His actual name was Achilles Aeceides (shh, no, Zag had definitely not scoped his credit card) and he was the most gorgeous person Zagreus had ever seen. And he was, in addition to his usual, also purchasing *Unbidden: Book 6: Whatever It's Called*.

"Hi! Didn't know you were a fan," Zagreus said, tapping the cover in question.

"Oh, it's a gift," Achilles replied. "My co-parent reads them." He shook his head with a rueful sort of look on his face. "Actually, she said the main character reminds her of me when I was younger."

"You can't have been all that bad," Zagreus joked. Achilles' other books were a volume of poetry and a chapter book in a series about dinosaurs in space, which he was always picking up because his son adored them. Yeah, that's right. This man had Handsome Dad Energy.

"Mm, I don't know about that." Achilles slipped each of the books into his tote bag as Zag rang them up, pausing while Zag tore a sticker off the roll of them they kept beneath the counter to give to the kids. Pyrrhus, Achilles' second-grader, wasn't here today, but he collected stickers on all his notebooks so Zag always made sure to include one.

"Made sure to give him a dinosaur sticker," Zagreus said, handing Achilles the chapter book.

"You're a dear. Thank you, Zagreus, I'll see you next I'm in—and I hope things lighten up for you today." He leaned over and knocked his knuckles on the countertop, giving Zagreus a sympathetic (and beautiful) smile.

Zagreus laughed and motioned as if praying to the gods above for a calmer shift.

As the door swung open and shut behind Achilles, Hermes leaned over and elbowed Zagreus in the side. "Was that Hot Bookstore Guy?"

"Quite clearly, yes," Zagreus said, taking the momentary lull in checkout to put back all the pens he'd pulled out of the mug that sat between the registers, because for some reason he just had to take out a new one every time he circled the coupon on somebody's receipt.

"He's into you."

"He is not." He turned around to rearrange the books on hold that were lined up against the back wall. "He's just nice."

"He was next in line for me but told that lady I just finished up with to go ahead of him because he wanted you to check him out. So he could check *you* out," Hermes said.

"Very funny. Hey, do you think you're fast enough to run past Athena and go across the street to get me an iced tea? A really big one?"

"Of *course*, Coz. Happy to. Also, if I don't, she's gonna make me help clean up that *Unbidden* display. Have fun doing that yourself, by the way."

He flipped Hermes off under the counter.

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Sunday was a bit more relaxed, and the bookstore closed early, so Zagreus was free after two P.M.

Zagreus had time to plan out his first day, color code his schedule, and worry about the fact that at twenty-six, he definitely wasn't going to blend

in with all the fresh-faced eighteen-year-olds in his classes. Well, maybe he'd have a better chance than he thought. He did look young for his age, or so said Than—then again, Than had bags under his eyes like he was going through a midlife crisis that had been there since he was sixteen.

It was weird, getting all the School Stuff as an adult. He hadn't even had a backpack, as his old one was not in his suitcase of essentials when he moved out of his dad's place. That was solved by Nyx, who gifted him a smart-looking messenger bag which would work for his schoolbooks and his laptop and also wouldn't make him feel like a child.

He did put an enamel pin with a skull that was on fire on it, though.

He rolled onto his side on his bed and looked at his closet, which, as usual, was open. What do you wear to your first day of college?

What had he worn when *he* was the fresh-faced eighteen-year-old? Ah. That's right. A leather jacket and skinny jeans that were way too tight and a band T-shirt he thought people might notice and make references to and then he'd make new friends. Plus the Chucks he'd drawn on with Sharpies all through high school whenever he got bored. Plus a necklace with a bird skull.

God, he'd been trying so hard.

He decided he'd wear joggers and a hoodie, and he went to bed early.

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Zagreus seriously regretted wearing joggers and a hoodie.

His first class was at eight A.M., and his shift at the bookstore started at twelve, so he'd have time to change into something more appropriate for work. Not that Athena's dress code was very strict, but sweats were a little sloppy. Zagreus usually wore jeans, or a skirt, or leggings, if he had a long enough shirt that he wouldn't get a side-eye from his cousin-slash-boss.

But there was something about the historic academic building that made Zagreus want to dress up a little, even for just an 8:00 A.M. World History 100 lecture. It felt like he should have a tweed jacket with elbow patches. Maybe some glasses. Really turn up the academia.

If there was anybody who looked like the definition of an academic, it was his professor, who he caught a glimpse of from behind as he entered. Medium brown suit jacket, maroon corduroy pants, shiny cognac-colored Oxfords. His hair was blond and long enough that it had to be swept up into a low bun.

Actually, that was a sort of familiar head of hair.

He turned, looking at Zagreus, of course, because Zag was ten minutes early and the only person in the classroom.

It was Achilles.

Zagreus was suddenly confronted with the fact that he knew very little about his regular customers, little enough that he had no earthly idea Achilles was a professor at all, much less a professor who'd be teaching Zag, and. Hey. Wait a minute.

"I don't remember your name on the—the thing for this class when I registered?" Zagreus said to him, which was a great way to start a conversation, much unlike, *"hi, good morning, how's my favorite customer today?"* Alright, maybe it was good he'd not said that last bit.

"Oh! It was a last-second change—you're... ah... forgive me, I don't have your name."

"Zagreus," said Zagreus, "I'm never wearing my name badge anyhow. I don't like people addressing me as if they know me. Not that I would mind if you! I mean. You do know me. Sort of. We've talked."

"What year are you, Zagreus?" Achilles asked, giving him a strange look of estimation.

"A freshman. But I'm twenty-six."

Achilles' expression cleared and he nodded. "That makes sense, I didn't think you could be a traditional student."

He was giving Zagreus a once-over that really made the regret-of-sweatpants increase. "Well, thank you, somebody at the shop asked if I was in high school the other day, so I appreciate it."

"I suppose you look younger when you shave—but could I trouble you to help me with something?"

"Anything," Zagreus said, trying to ignore the reference to how he looked while he was scruffy.

"I'm supposed to be able to wirelessly connect my laptop to this projector, but it's fighting me all the way. God, I miss being able to just plug in an HDMI cord." Achilles dragged a hand over his forehead, sweeping back some hair that came loose from his bun.

"Of course! I'm actually sort of good at these things." Zagreus stepped around the desk to peer at his laptop, smiling when he saw that the desktop background was a picture of Pyrrhus, a few years younger, sitting in the grass with a fluffy sheepdog next to him. "I think your laptop just needs to be disconnected from whatever device is already attached—there. Okay, give me a second to make sure this works."

"You're an angel," Achilles said, as the projector mounted on the ceiling flickered on and the screen behind them lit up. He immediately started flicking through his notes, which he kept all on paper, despite presenting his lecture with a digital slideshow.

"No problem, Achilles—er—professor. Professor? Dr. Aeceides? Sir?"

"Not 'sir', I'm only 'sir' in the bedroom," Achilles muttered, continuing to thumb through his notebook.

Zagreus, in all his bisexual disaster glory, went bright fucking red and stared open-mouthed at him.

Achilles looked up and caught him gaping like an idiot. "Sorry. Bad joke. 'Professor' or 'Achilles' are both fine. Dr. Aeceides is my father. There, that's a better one."

Zagreus had to pause for a second, so that the next words out of his mouth weren't, "*can I get in your bed and call you 'sir'?*" He cleared his throat. "Well. Professor. I think you're good to go."

And then he was saved by the other students filing in, slowly slinking to a chair to open his laptop and accept that he would be saying, *sir, please, yes*, whenever he touched himself for *weeks*.

— Week 3 —

Sometimes, it so happened that the stars aligned and fate smiled upon the house of Zag-and-Charon-and-Than-and-Hypnos. On those blessed occasions, all four of them were awake and at home simultaneously and they were celebrated with the time-honored rite of ordering a bunch of take-out and eating at the coffee table.

Hermes was around, too, flitting back and forth and eventually depositing himself in Charon's lap, leaning back against his chest and letting Charon scratch him under the chin like he was a puppy. "So, Zagreus," Hermes said, sticking his foot out to nudge Zag in the knee. "What's this about Hot Bookshop Guy being your professor?"

Of course, Hermes was the first person Zag had complained to after his class. He hadn't, however, been expecting him to bring it up in front of Thanatos and Hypnos, both of whom stopped in the tracks of their conversation and tuned into this disaster. Thanks, Hermes. (Of course, Zag expected Charon knew. Hermes told Charon everything.)

"Oh, uh. Class is fine. I'm bad at history, you know, remembering dates, but he teaches more about like—movements and kingdoms and it's almost like a story, more than a lesson." Plus, Achilles' voice was heaven to listen to for

an hour every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It was soft and a little scratchy, his even, unbroken cadence making pleasant tingles go up Zagreus' neck when he listened to Achilles lecture. "Damn hard to pay attention sometimes, though."

Last week, Achilles wore this shirt that was a little too small on him and the way it pulled over his shoulders and his chest had Zagreus squirming in his seat.

"So, are you gonna hit that, orrr...?"

"I can't! He's my *professor*, that's like, illegal."

"Is that illegal, Than?" Hypnos asked, leaning over to steal one of Than's pieces of sushi and stuffing it in his mouth before his brother could complain.

Than scoffed, the way he did when he was annoyed, that little *tch*! "I don't know if it's illegal."

"Isn't that why you're in law school?" Hypnos mumbled around his mouthful.

"The fact that I am in law school does not mean I know *every law*. And that's not even the kind of law I'm studying," Thanatos said.

"Uh-huh," said Hypnos, who definitely did not know what kind of law Thanatos was studying. That said, Zag didn't really, either. It was all white-collar, corporate business nonsense that made Zag's mind turn into static whenever Thanatos talked about it.

"That said, it's probably against university policy but not illegal. You're an adult," Thanatos said.

"So, go for it." Hermes snuggled back into Charon's chest even though Charon was not exactly the most cozy person to cuddle up to. All bones, that man.

"I'm not saying 'go for it'," Thanatos grumbled.

"Go for it. Break some rules. Get some dick."

"*Hermes*," Zagreus said, going several shades of red at the idea of *breaking some rules* and *getting some dick*.

He didn't say he wasn't going to try, though.

— Week 5 —

'Break some rules, get some dick' was harder than it sounded when Hermes was blithely instructing Zagreus while eating take-out on the couch.

Achilles was a wonderful professor, and Zagreus, for the first time in his college career, was actually sort of doing *well* in a history class. And of course Achilles remained a constant presence at the bookshop, as well as one of Zagreus' favorite customers. (Zagreus' real favorite customer was Pyrrhus, naturally. He liked to have intellectual conversations about velociraptors.)

And Zagreus, well...

Zagreus was no stranger to the intense feeling of not wanting to fuck something up.

Also, he wasn't the only one in his predicament.

On Monday, he'd heard two girls in class giggling and wondering over whether Achilles was single. On Wednesday, he'd heard a guy complaining that his girlfriend was in another of Achilles' classes and wouldn't stop talking about how hot her professor was. On Friday, he'd heard a girl say, "*sure, I might be married, but I can still look at him.*"

Of course Zagreus wasn't the first one to think 'wow, god, is my professor the hottest man in the world?' The way those other students spoke made him feel so uncomfortable by proxy, he couldn't help but imagine how awkward it would be for Achilles. Had Achilles ever had to turn down a student who was interested in more than just an academic relationship with him? Would

Zagreus just be another in a long line of unpleasant rejections? Was Achilles even interested in men at all?

So, no, he couldn't simply break some rules, get some dick.

Definitely not.

He could, however, order an advance copy of the next *Prehistoric Galaxy* books and beg Athena to let him give it to Achilles for Pyrrhus. Technically, ARCs weren't supposed to go outside the bookstore (until the release date passed and then they were given out as freebies). They were to be used in order to review the title and determine whether the shop wanted to order some for their stock. Zag had heard this speech more than once.

Zagreus also knew Pyrrhus' birthday was October 31st, and that he could order an ARC to arrive at the beginning of the month. After a lot of reassuring Athena that it would be in good hands and that Achilles would allow book crimes to happen about as soon as Athena herself would, she'd been convinced.

He had mentioned to Achilles that he ought to stop by the bookstore soon, with a bit of a wink and a nudge and a 'just bring yourself, there's a surprise for the little guy', and Achilles promised he'd be in Saturday while Pyrrhus was with his mother. This meant Zagreus spent all of his Saturday shift craning around every time the door swung open to see if there might be anybody tall, blond, and handsome coming his way.

Eventually, Athena told him to go to the basement and sort the 'return-to-publishers' stacks. Rude. Zagreus hated sorting the return stacks and Artemis, who loved it, was closing today. It was also a bit difficult to do in a skirt, but this ankle-length, red velvet number was cute as hell on him, and he wanted Achilles to see him in it.

He was still deep in a pile of returns when someone came down the creaking stairs to the basement, where the adult science fiction and fantasy lived, and also the returns and the creepy basement bathroom that Zagreus never used if he could help it.

He looked up to see Achilles with his hand on the stair rail, peering into the semi-dark of the basement level, which always felt especially gloomy when the sun was coming through the back door and leaving the stair landing awash in brightness and making the sudden drop into relative dark even more severe. "Zagreus?" Achilles called.

Zagreus almost tripped over a box of books trying to stumble out of the 'employees only' section. "Achilles! Hi!" He jumped the rope and freed himself of his returns prison, shoving down the sleeves of his black sweater as he went, so his *look* was intact. He hoped he hadn't fucked up his eyeliner since he'd last checked.

"Athena sent me down," Achilles said. "She told me you were keeping an eye out for me."

"Yes! I've got something for you, actually," Zagreus said, doing a bit of an awkward dance to step around Achilles and toward the staircase, while Achilles tried to figure out what the hell he was doing. "It's upstairs, sorry. Follow me?"

The bookshop was built in the shell of an old townhouse on main street—two townhouses, rather, that had been adjoined at some point in the past. It creaked and groaned but Athena kept things upright, and called on her brother Haphaestus to fix things if they got too run-down for her to handle herself. Upstairs was all nonfiction, and was brighter and airier with more windows and white paint on the walls and the shelves, while downstairs was shades of mahogany and tan. It also contained Athena's cramped little office and another storage room that was entirely devoted to ARCs, because if there was one thing Athena was bad at, it was getting rid of books.

This section had seemed like a treasure trove to Zagreus when he was first hired. He hadn't even known bookstores were given advance copies, and here were droves of them. Later, he realized most of the ones they automatically received were not exactly *quality* books, and they had to special-order anything good or exciting, and even then, it was rare they could actually get a copy of a big release. *Unbidden* had been a special case, actually, because the author was local. She'd sent it to all the nearby bookshops, from what Zagreus heard.

The room was painted blue-green and with the only light coming through the window, that hue was cast over everything. Zagreus wasn't sure where the lightswitch was, but he assumed it was behind a bookshelf. "You know, I rarely come upstairs," Achilles said, which made sense, because he enjoyed fiction and history and those were both downstairs, as were the children's books. "I don't think I even noticed this was back here."

"There are a lot of hiding spots for such a small shop," Zagreus agreed. "Would you believe I actually got lost the first time I was in here?"

"I would, indeed," Achilles said, leaning his hip against the table in the center of the room, arms folded so he took up less space, peeking into the huge boxes of books that sat all over the table. "Coming soon, December... this is last year."

Zagreus had his back turned, reaching up for the top of the shelf where the newest ARCs lived, fumbling around for the book he'd stuck a post-it on that read 'ZAGREUS—DO NOT TAKE THIS'. "Yeah, we gotta get rid of some old ones. That's relatively recent by the standards of this room—gotcha!" He rocked back off his toes and turned to face Achilles, peeling off the post-it and stuffing it in his pocket. "Ta-da! I asked Athena to order this for Pyrrhus."

Achilles looked at the book and then held it to his chest as if it was a priceless treasure instead of a slim paperback. "Zagreus, this is—thank you. I can hardly accept this."

"It's fine, obviously you're not going to make illegal copies or anything."

"I... well, it is less the book and more the, ah, *feelings* that I think accompany such a gift?" He shook his head. "Unless I am being completely presumptuous, in which case I am sorry."

"You're not. Being presumptuous." Oh, so this was *happening*. Sure, had Zagreus imagined a declaration of his feelings accompanying this gift? Had Zagreus dressed a little fancier for the occasion? Of course. He'd even worn the skull earrings Meg got him last year. "I've been interested in, um.

Getting to know you better. For some time, now. Like, dating." If he could maybe speak in full sentences that would be great.

"You're my student, Zagreus."

"I know, I know—I wasn't going to actually say anything until the semester was over, because, well, that." And also because that way if it went bad, he wouldn't have to stare at Achilles in class all week thinking about it. Now he was going to stare at Achilles in class all week thinking about it. Goddammit. He lifted his fingers to his lips to bite his nails and then remembered Thanatos had painted them so that he'd stop. He lowered his hand instead and smoothed his hands down his sides, sticking them into his pockets.

"And, beyond that, my life is a bit complicated. My love life, in specific." He ran a hand through his hair. "He told me I ought to go for it, but—this isn't exactly an ordinary scenario." He breathed, deep, and on exhale, said, "I am in a committed, if open relationship."

Zagreus cocked his head to the side. "Is that... is there more to it?"

"No, simply that my heart would not only be yours, and I know that is not preferable for some. Most. And you are my student, so I wouldn't be comfortable starting any sort of romantic relationship until after the semester ends."

"I'm not put off by the polyamorous thing," Zagreus said. "I've done it before, actually. I had a girlfriend and she had a girlfriend but I wasn't dating the other girl—it's hard to explain. So your... boyfriend? He knows?" He was assuming that was the 'he' in the *'he told me I ought to go for it'*.

"I might have mentioned you once or twice." Achilles gave him a weak smile. "Or a dozen times. Forgive me, I don't quite have the words. This is... unexpected. Especially the part where you're of the same mind with regard to romance."

Zagreus only shrugged. "It's not for everyone, but I didn't mind it before. The only reason it didn't go long-term is that my relationship with Meg was less romantic than I wanted it to be." He cleared his throat, catching himself amidst his ramblings and remembering where exactly he was at. "Anyway, we can talk about it in more detail when we're not, erm, in the back room of the shop."

"Yes, of course. Coffee, maybe? On the other side of midterms?"

"Absolutely," Zagreus said, feeling like his breath was stolen from him.

"Alright, good. Yes. Good. And, sincerely, thank you again for this." He drummed his fingers on the cover of the book. "Pyrrhus is going to absolutely love it."

Before he left, he tucked the book into his bag and wrapped Zagreus up in a hug that made Zag want to melt. He smelled good, like citrus and spice, or maybe a good cup of Earl Grey. He was warm and strong and held Zagreus in a way that felt easy and secure, yet soft. It was over too soon.

And then he was gone, and Zag was left with the giddy feeling inside of him that made him want to jump up and down so hard he rattled the ceiling below.

— Week 7 —

"So, he's not single."

"Mm-mn."

"But he is interested."

"Yup."

"And his partner is aware and a-ok with it?"

"Yeah—Hermes, really, I *am* trying to study," Zagreus said, flicking through yet another page of his Biology textbook. This class was really kicking his ass.

"Have you met the partner? Boyfriend? Girlfriend? Is it a boyfriend or a girlfriend? Is it his kid's mother?" Hermes, who was not in school and had thus forgotten any of what it meant to have to worry about it, was kicked back laying on the carpet with his phone in front of his face and his feet propped up on the couch.

"Boyfriend. If you're going to hang out here, at least quiz me on this stuff," Zagreus said, handing over the practice exam. "And no, I have not met him."

"You ought to."

"I *ought* not to fail my classes."

Hermes flipped the practice exam around so he was looking at it right-side-up, and gave an exasperated sigh, reading out the first question in a manner that showed Zagreus exactly how bored he was with this.

"Okay, define mitochondria. If you don't know this one, I have several memes for you."

"My professor is going to require a bit more than memes, Hermes."

"I would give you bonus credit for memes."

Zagreus rattled off a simulacrum of the practice exam's answer, and Hermes corrected him. At the very least, Hermes seemed to enjoy that portion.

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Zagreus kept his Psychology notes tucked just to the side of the register, because it was pouring rain, the bookshop was slow, and his midterm was in a few hours. When the door opened, he looked up and greeted the man who walked in with his usual, "hi, how are you?" followed by a helpful, "we've got an umbrella stand right there to your left!"

"Thank you." The man leaned his hand out the door to shake off his umbrella a bit more before sliding it into the stand, turning down the collar of his navy trench coat and tugging it off to reveal that his thick coils of

dark hair trailed all the way down his mid-back. He slung the coat over one arm and turned to face Zagreus, walking straight up to the counter. He did not, as Zagreus expected, begin the conversation with a request for a book, but just leaned on the counter like it was a bar-top and observed Zag for a moment.

Zagreus observed right back. He was gorgeous, brown skin and brown eyes and a full, neat beard. He wore silver-rimmed glasses and a rose-pink sweater and a smile like Zagreus was exactly who he had come to this shop to see.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, stranger," he said, in a soft voice, gentle in a way the sharpness in his gaze was not.

"Can I help you find something?" Zagreus asked him.

"Yes, in fact. I'm looking for something for my partner."

"Do you have anything in mind?"

He hummed, looking around the shop. "He likes historical fiction but only if it's very old, complicated political thrillers but only if they're fictional, and occasional sappy romances but you didn't hear that from me."

"Oh, that's no problem—I have a great recommendation for historical fiction," Zagreus said, ducking around the counter and pulling a title Achilles had bought just last week. His reading choices were how Zagreus was starting to learn that Achilles truly did love what he taught—the more ancient, the better, when it came to ancient history. "One of my regulars picked this up, I haven't heard his review on it yet, but he seemed excited about it and he's a historian, so that's how you know it's good."

He examined the cover but handed it back to Zagreus. "Ah, unfortunately he's already brought that one home. The hard thing about buying books for a reader, especially one who goes to the bookstore on a consistent basis." He gently spun one of the rotating displays, looking over the covers. "If I must, I'll just pick up his holds for him. But I sort of wanted to bring a surprise. Say—what have you read recently that you enjoy?"

It was a common enough question, especially since most people who worked in bookshops were avid readers. "Unfortunately, I haven't gotten much chance to read anything lately," Zagreus said. "I've got midterms right now. I did read that one, actually, near the beginning of the semester." He pointed as his customer stepped over to a table display they had set up with a placard that read '*Fantasy for Every Age Group!*' In the center, labeled for young adult readers, was the newest *Unbidden* book, which had hardly slowed down in sales since it came out. "But it's not close to the genre you're looking for."

He ran his fingers over the author's name, embossed in giant silver letters. OPUS. The earlier books had 'Pat Opus', but Zagreus thought maybe they didn't want to advertise that the author was a woman, because they were worried they'd attract less male readers (he suspected this was also why they kept the author's bio brief and genderless, without a photo).

"Are you fond of them?"

"I wasn't a massive fan of the first few," he said. "I think she took a while to find her stride. But that latest one is really well done. I mean, I'm particularly happy because the protagonist had a male love interest this time 'round and it seems like they're actually going to say outright that he's bisexual—anyway, I could go on, but that's pretty rare."

"She took a while to find her stride?"

"It's her first series." He started straightening some of the other books on the display just to give his hands something to do. "The earlier books are good, they just get better. It's a good thing."

He smiled, and looked even more handsome for it. "Thank you," he said. "I suppose I should quit teasing you."

"Teasing me?" Zagreus asked.

"Mm. I'm here to pick up something for Achilles Aeceides. And to poke around. It's not every day your partner admits he finally talked about his

feelings with the attractive man who works at the bookshop—the one he's been pining over for a year now."

Zagreus' eyes went wide and he froze, sure he would have dropped anything he was holding. Pining for over a *year*? "He what. Who? *Achilles*?" He shook his head, trying to make something more coherent fly out. "*You're Achilles' boyfriend?*" It stood to reason. He was just as gorgeous as Achilles.

"Mm. Apologies for the subterfuge. I can't help myself, at times," he sighed. "And Achilles has been over-worked with exams, I thought I'd get him a bit of a pick-me-up."

"Oh, um. Right. We did get something in from that guy he likes who writes the—well, anyway, he pre-ordered it, so it's not exactly a surprise." He stuck out his hand before realizing it was stupid to introduce himself. "I'm Zagreus, by the way. But you probably know that already. Given that. Achilles. Well."

"I'm Pat." He took Zagreus' hand, didn't shake, just held onto him for what felt like a bit too long and not long enough, simultaneously. "It is an immense pleasure to meet you, Zagreus."

"Yes. Um. Wow, that was a surprise." *If I'm dating Achilles, can I date you too? Maybe just a little bit?*

"Didn't mean to scare you," Pat said. "I'll just pick up everything Achilles has on hold for him."

"And not that one?" Zagreus asked of *Unbidden*.

"Oh, god knows I've read it enough times," he said, almost rolling his eyes at the concept.

Zagreus ducked back behind the register and rang up the book Achilles had on hold, leaving the one he'd pre-ordered and already paid for on the counter. "You know, the author of that book, her name's Pat, too," he said.

"Mm. Are you quite sure?"

"Yeah, it's not on that one, but—" Zagreus ran his card and then handed it back. "How the hell do you even pronounce your last name?" It was absurdly long, started with an M, and made Zagreus glad he wasn't setting up an account for Pat because he'd definitely spell it wrong. His first name was a mouthful as well, 'Pat' was short for 'Patroclus'.

"Zagreus, darling. 'Opus' is my pseudonym."

Zagreus dropped the bookmark he'd been holding and didn't bother to pick it up. "Holy shit. You're a legend... I mean. Quite a well-known author, aren't you?"

"Apparently so." Pat took his card back, then gave a rueful shake of his head. "I'm sorry, I don't quite know how to react to all this. I'm quite reclusive, as writers go."

"So I hear," Zagreus said. Pat wasn't on any social media and didn't do any signings prior to book releases, and Artemis was constantly pissed off about it. "Well, uh. Thanks for sending us an ARC."

"Of course."

Zagreus suddenly remembered what he was supposed to be doing and slid Pat's books into a bag. "Well. It's been lovely meeting you. I apologize if I'm exceedingly awkward, um, I'd say it's that midterms have fried my brain but... no, I'm just always like this."

Pat was still smiling at him despite his rambling. "Oh, I certainly do see it."

"See what?" Zagreus asked.

"I see why my Achilles likes you so much." Then he winked, turned, picked up his umbrella, and left Zagreus staring in stunned silence.

Holy *fuck*, who was this man?

— **Week 9** —

Achilles didn't bring up their conversation in the back room, even after midterms, and Zagreus was so fucking worn out that he didn't have the emotional bandwidth for it (god, if midterms were this bad, what were finals gonna do to him?). But after a couple of weeks he recovered—more than recovered. He was struck with a whole new sort of longing for Achilles, mutual affection acknowledged but nothing past that. Was Achilles waiting on him to make the first move?

Zagreus told himself that was probably the case as he busied himself packing away his things for class with intentional, extreme slowness. He normally threw everything in his bag and was out the door among the first, not out of eagerness to leave, just a characteristic inability to move slowly. Today, he put each of his pens (four of them, so he could color code his notes) into his pencil case separately, thumbed his notebook shut with particular languidness, took a moment to say goodbye to the girl who sat next to him and completely paused in his actions while they spoke.

Once all the other students had trailed out of the room, he slung his messenger bag over his shoulder and approached the front of the lecture hall and met Achilles, who looked as if he might be taking a similarly lengthy amount of time to pack up his things.

Zagreus fumbled with the strap on his bag as he dug a moment for the right words, even though he'd been running them through his head for the entire lecture. "So, um—I wanted to ask you about our... conversation, before?"

Achilles smiled when he said, "I hoped that was what you were waiting to talk about. First things first, though—Pat tells me he met you? I'm sorry."

"No need to be! I like him, he's... he's funny. We mostly talked about books. He didn't tell me I was talking about *his book* until I'd been going on for some time, but I think that's because he was a bit shy about it."

"You're remarkably perceptive, Zagreus," Achilles said, leaning back against the heavy wooden podium where his laptop and notes for class sat.

"Thanks," Zagreus said. "I'd give quite a bit to know what's going on in your head now, though. If you... if you really aren't interested in anything

with me any longer, that's all right."

"Oh, no! That's not—" Achilles set down his notebook abruptly and took a step toward Zagreus. *God*, he was tall. Zagreus came up to his chest. This close, without a desk or a counter between them, Achilles was arrestingly beautiful. His eyes were soft and Zagreus couldn't help but notice the shape his upper lip made, like a perfect bow. "Zagreus, I am, in every conceivable way, so attracted to you."

Zagreus' breath all left him at once. "Achilles," he said, then drew in a shaky inhale. "I want you—so bad and so much I'm worried I'll—I'll scare you."

Achilles touched him then, a gentle brush of fingertips down Zagreus' jaw. "I am no stranger to that sort of wanting, Zagreus."

He took another step closer. Zagreus lifted his head, his hands skittering nervously over the front of Achilles' open blazer before slipping beneath to settle with as little pressure possible on his waist.

"Please tell me you're about to kiss me," Zagreus said.

"I was considering it. If you're amenable." His tongue pushed at his lower lip and Zagreus was overcome with the urge to taste him.

"Please," he said again.

Achilles cupped the back of his head and drew him into a slow but firm kiss that had Zagreus' grip on his waist tightening until he could feel the soft ribbed texture of the under-shirt Achilles wore beneath his button-down. There was a gentle rush of breath through Achilles' nose as he gave a pleased sigh, his free hand slipping around to Zagreus' back. Achilles didn't try to pull him closer, just held him where he was at and let Zagreus do the work of drawing them steadily together, giving him another kiss, then another. The empty lecture hall felt suddenly small, as if it had contracted into a bubble around the two of them. Zag's head was full of the sound of Achilles' mouth on his.

When he teased his tongue against Achilles' lip, Achilles gave him a startled groan and held him tighter, his hand on Zagreus' back turning into a fist in the soft material of Zag's sweater. He let Zagreus deepen the kiss, let Zagreus' hands stroke up his back, feeling the shift of well-defined muscle beneath his shirt. Zagreus went up on his tiptoes so that his chest pressed against Achilles', letting Achilles hold onto him to steady him.

The doors to the lecture hall were still open. They should really stop, but Achilles was letting him keep going, and he tasted like the peppermint tea he drank while he lectured, and his soft hair was brushing Zagreus' cheeks and his firm hands were slipping beneath Zagreus' sweater—he wasn't wearing anything under there, Achilles' hands were on his skin, and it made him shiver and press forward, a little roll of his hips that made Achilles pull back and swear.

"Fuck, Zagreus, you're—"

Zagreus didn't care what he was, he just kissed Achilles again.

"—incredible—"

Another cheeky press of his lips to cut Achilles off in his tracks.

This time when they parted, Achilles lifted his head and pulled back, and Zagreus didn't push him further. He rocked back onto his heels, adoring the flush on Achilles' face and the taste of Achilles' tea on his lips.

"You know, I was just going to ask you to coffee, but..."

"I can do that, too," Zagreus said. "I can definitely do that, too."

"Good. Let me give you my cell." Achilles turned around, shuffling through his notebook for something to write on and coming up with a post-it note that already had 'ch. 13 review material' written on it. He struck a line through that notation and wrote his number beneath. "Call me, and we can work out the details. I'd do it now, but I'm already late, and—"

Zagreus hopped up on his tiptoes again to give him one more kiss, and then stepped back. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll talk to you later."

"Right. Yes, I'll be seeing you." Achilles had a smile on that was heart-meltingly anxious.

"Bye," Zagreus said, and then headed with his usual haste toward the door.

He rushed through the halls and down the short stairway that connected the old lecture hall to the newer sciences building, his scuffed sneakers squeaking on the laminate. Most of the between-class bustle had died down while Zagreus was busy with an immensely thrilling kiss, so there was hardly anybody to dodge as he made his way to the exit that faced the parking lot.

The late October air was crisp and the sky was bright and scattered with gold and orange leaves as he burst through the double doors feeling like he might break into song. He leapt up, giving a little shout of triumph and punching at the air, so thrilled he had to exult or he'd explode.

Zagreus was practically dancing his way to his car, and in his exuberance, didn't notice he was walking straight into somebody until they'd already collided and Zagreus had been sent flying backward because he might as well have hit a telephone pole instead of a person, for how sturdy they were.

"Whoa, there, stranger." It was Patroclus, of all people, catching Zagreus by the hand before he tumbled back flat on his ass and tugging him to his feet with an easy motion. It was like Zagreus weighed nothing.

"Oh! Shit! Sorry, I wasn't looking—"

"No, neither was I," Pat said, brushing off Zagreus' shoulder even though he hadn't hit the dirt. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm alright," Zagreus said. "A little... embarrassed, maybe, but fine." Especially because this meant Pat probably saw him dancing around like a lunatic.

"No need to be embarrassed," Pat said, with the sort of smile that told Zagreus he definitely saw him dancing around. "Say, Zagreus—have you seen my dear Achilles lately? He was supposed to meet me for breakfast."

So that's what Achilles was worried about being late for. "I'm afraid I might have held him up." Actually, Achilles held Zagreus up, physically speaking. Zagreus tried not to think of that and cleared his throat before continuing. "He's still in the classroom, if you know where it is?"

"I do. I'll be seeing you, then. And keep an eye out for where you're going this time, yes?"

"Yessir," Zagreus replied.

"So polite," Patroclus said with a grin, and Zagreus suddenly remembered Achilles remarking, offhand, *I'm only 'sir' in the bedroom*. Ostensibly, Patroclus would be the one bestowing that title on him. "Good lad," Patroclus continued, giving him a little pat on the shoulder, and Zagreus swore the autumn day got ten degrees hotter.

— Week 11 —

Scheduling a date with Achilles was more difficult than anticipated. Both of them had plans for Halloween (Zagreus: horror movie marathon with the roomies; Achilles: taking Pyrrhus trick-or-treating) and the next weekend, Zag was working all day because Athena was on her yearly trip someplace warm to spend a few days by herself.

They had been texting the whole time, though, and Zagreus was doing a lot more hesitating after class to hang around (although there had been no more kisses since the first).

But today was the day.

Zagreus had asked if Achilles wanted to go to the local coffee shop, to which Achilles had explained that every time he went there, he was always stopped by some student or another who had questions about his class. Teaching so many freshman-year seminar classes, all of which had around

two hundred students, meant Achilles was recognizable to a good portion of the student body. And even if Zagreus was not obviously a student, there was a decent enough chance that someone in his class would be the one to stop them—and Thanatos had been correct in that dating his professor wasn't illegal but it was against student policy.

Zagreus really didn't want Achilles to get fired over him. Achilles assured him he probably wouldn't, but 'probably' still had a chance. Worried for any trouble he might cause, Zagreus offered to postpone their date until after the semester was over and winter break had begun.

That was the closest Achilles had gotten to kissing him again. He leaned in, put his cheek against the side of Zagreus' head, and said, *"I find my capacity for patience less with you around. I want you too badly to hold out that long."*

He still shivered when he thought about it.

Thus, their very first date was going to be at Achilles' house, on a day when Pyrrhus was at his mother's and Pat was on a trip for work and Zagreus and Achilles would have some time alone together.

Hermes kept waggling his eyebrows whenever Zagreus talked about it, like there was some innuendo in Achilles asking Zagreus over to his place. If there was, Zagreus was all for it, but he did rather want Hermes to cut it out.

Achilles' home was in a quiet neighborhood of mostly older houses, a few of them newly restored and a few of them looking unlived-in and possibly condemned but most of them looking cozy and well-loved. There were trees lining the streets that had grown through the sidewalks, and steep hills up to most of the houses, including Achilles'. Zagreus recognized it from Achilles' description of the door—bright yellow, arch-shaped, with a half-moon window at the top.

A leaf pile sat on the curb outside Achilles' place, and Pyrrhus' bike was parked on the front stoop. The garden was well-cared-for and through the wide windows facing the street, Zagreus could see even more plants inside.

When he knocked on the door, he heard barking from inside. Then there was shouting over the barking, and then Achilles opened the front door, pushing a whole squad of dogs away with his foot.

"Hi!" Zagreus said, more to the dogs than Achilles, dropping to his knees to greet them. One of them—a short, wide beast that looked like it was a pitt mix—tried to climb onto Zagreus' head and lick him to death while another snuffled at the hole in the knee of his jeans and a third, which he couldn't see beyond the two dogs currently occupying each of his arms, was still yipping. He just barely managed to glimpse a chihuahua in an orange sweater.

"Oh, god, I'm so sorry about them," Achilles said. "C'mon. Out you go!" He gave a sharp whistle and urged all of the pups off Zagreus, herding them further into the house, shouting over his shoulder that he was just going to let them out the back.

"You don't have to!" Zagreus called after him, but he could already hear a sliding door open and close, and the barking turn muffled. "Really, it would be fine."

"Not at all," Achilles said, stepping back into the foyer-slash-living room. Zag got the briefest chance to look around (books and plants and more books and more plants) before Achilles wrapped him up in a hug that he melted into. "They want to be on top of everyone who steps through this door, and if I allowed them to remain in the house I'd hardly get a chance to do this."

Zagreus laughed, laying his cheek against the soft green sweater Achilles was wearing, squeezing him just a little tighter before letting go.

"Also, Pat's dog is a demon and I'll not put up with him."

"Which one is he?" None of them had seemed even the littlest bit demonic. Very good boys all 'round.

"Onion, the chihuahua. I should rephrase: he's an angel to everybody and a demon to me. He would sabotage me if he saw I had a date over. Don't

laugh."

"I'm not laughing," Zagreus laughed.

Achilles nudged him in the side until he composed himself. "It's alright, nobody believes me. Would you like a tour?"

"Yes, of course!"

Achilles put a hand on the small of his back to steer him through the house, which sent a little thrill through Zagreus. At the front of the house was the living room that the dogs and Achilles had greeted him in, a dining room, and a hallway that led to Achilles' (and Pat's) bedroom and an office.

The kitchen took up the center of the house, long and narrow, and beyond it was a smaller secondary living room that looked like it had been added on later and was full of brighter, more colorful decorations and bookshelves that looked like they belonged to Pyrrhus. Achilles said Pyrrhus' bedroom was back here, as well. Zagreus also saw one of the dogs, the big fluffy golden retriever, peeking through the sliding glass door at the back of the house.

"Are we still on for baking?" Zagreus asked, as the tour landed them back in the kitchen. This had been Achilles' suggestion but Zag had immediately agreed to it, because baking together on a date sounded adorable. He'd gotten more nervous the closer they actually approached to the date. "I should warn you, I'm not very good in the kitchen." He wasn't terrible, just not an expert by any means and he did have that bad habit of leaving things in the oven for far too long.

"Certainly," Achilles said. "And you don't need to worry, I picked an easy recipe, it'll be no trouble to teach you."

"Just don't let me burn anything."

"Noted. Would you like tea?" Achilles asked, going to a cabinet overtop of the coffee maker at the far end of the kitchen.

"You remembered!" Zagreus had mentioned while discussing the logistics of a coffee date that he was more of a tea person, himself. "Maybe after we have some snacks to go with?"

"I like the way you think," Achilles said, and detoured to a shelf of recipe books instead.

Bookshelves even in the kitchen. This man. Although, given that Pat was a writer, he probably had something to do with that decor choice.

Achilles pulled a recipe book that had a lot of post-it notes written in what Zagreus noticed was not his handwriting. Pat's, he guessed, and Achille confirmed that shortly. Apparently he was the more accomplished baker of the two and he often had modifications to recipes that he preferred.

Achilles was just as good at teaching Zagreus how to bake as he was at teaching him history, and by the time they had a batch of oatmeal-chocolate-chip cookies in the oven, Zagreus was feeling quite self-satisfied, even if most of his contribution had been mixing things together and washing dishes.

They flirted the whole while—Achilles' kitchen was narrow, and passing by one another often resulted in incidental contact. It was both of them that made that contact last, Zagreus refusing to get out of Achilles' way until he got a kiss on the cheek, Achilles standing deliberately close while he showed Zagreus what size the cookies should be.

Zagreus took his duties seriously despite the fooling around, and he kept the kitchen clean enough that once the timer was set and everything was baking, Achilles wasted no time in lifting Zagreus right up onto the counter and standing between his legs to kiss him.

They pressed up against one another, Zagreus' legs crossing at the ankles behind Achilles' back, Achilles' palms smoothing over Zag's thighs. This time, Achilles tasted like the chocolate chips he'd been stealing from Zagreus and there was no hesitation in the way they kissed, no part of their attention on the door and whoever might walk through it.

"You know what I've been thinking about?" Zagreus asked once his mouth was free to do so. Achilles hummed and ducked his head, kissing Zagreus' jaw and then, when Zagreus lifted his chin, his neck. "The last time we did this, in the lecture hall—I ran into Pat on my way out."

Achilles gave another little hum, his warm breath just below Zagreus' ear.

"If I'd kept kissing you a few minutes longer, he would have walked in on us in the middle of it."

Achilles pulled away, and *this* noise was not a hum, it was a full-throated *moan*. "You'd like for him to catch us in the act?" he asked, his voice husky. Zagreus shifted forward a little, and with his groin pressed tight to Achilles' belly, the obviousness of his desire even though his clothes was enough to make him flush. Especially when Achilles was looking at him with such naked want.

"Yes," Zagreus said, his voice small. "If... if that wouldn't be uncomfortable for you. Or him."

"My darling, I know full well how much he would want to watch us. To watch *you*. You're so pretty when you're like this. Want me to invite him on our next date, so he can see you in my arms like this?"

"Yes! Achilles—" Zagreus ground against him again, the pressure almost too good, almost painful. "Achilles, I want more!"

"In the *kitchen*, Zagreus?" he asked, a note of faux scandal in his voice.

"Yes, dammit, in the kitchen, you're just—working me up like this—"

Precisely at that moment, the timer on the oven piped up, and Zagreus was stopped in his tracks.

Ah, well. Cookies were just as important, if you asked him.

The cookies turned out fantastic, which was all Achilles' influence. While they ate, Achilles let the dogs back in, and true to his words, Onion did not want to be anywhere near Achilles and scampered off somewhere. The

other two curled up in a dog bed next to the couch Achilles and Zag were seated on (Zagreus learned that the pit bull was named Beans, and the retriever was named Mashed Potato—Mashie Tato for short, and that Pyrrhus had chosen both their names).

They talked about books, mostly, because what else were you supposed to talk about on a first date, other than the thing that brought you together in the first place? Achilles was positively brimming with book recommendations, and Zagreus had a feeling he was going to be sent home with several he wasn't going to be able to even consider reading until finals were over.

Eventually, Zagreus looked at Achilles' mostly-empty coffee cup and said, "you should set that down."

"Hm?" He had the mug resting on his knee, tapping his thumb against the top of the handle.

"You should put your mug down, because I want to be in your lap instead."

Achilles laughed, then turned to set his mug on the end table and allowed Zag to climb over him. Zag didn't kiss Achilles right away, just settled against him, waiting for Achilles to make the move this time. Achilles ran his hands up and down Zagreus' back, and everything felt so serene, Zagreus could have sworn this was the thousandth time they'd done this sort of thing.

"You know, I said that thing about inviting Pat along on our next date in the heat of the moment—you don't have to agree with it, if you don't want," Achilles said.

"Maybe the three of us could grab lunch or something, so I can actually get to know him better," Zagreus said. "I like him a lot, though. This is just... I know I told you I'd done something like this before, but I'm afraid this feels more different than I expected, dating someone who's been with another person for so long." Nine years, Achilles had said.

“What do you think of it?” Achilles asked him, his touches moving to the back of Zagreus’ neck.

“I... don’t entirely know, yet. I want to keep going with this. I like you a lot—and him, too.”

“Take each day as it comes, Zagreus. As long as you’re clear with me on how you’re feeling about things, I think we’ll be alright.”

“Thanks, Achilles.” Zagreus nosed at his chest, running his hand down Achilles’ side. “God, if I stay here I’m going to fall asleep.”

“You can sleep,” Achilles said.

“Oh, hey Zagreus, what did you do on your date?” “I took a nap!” Zagreus said, mimicking the inevitable conversation he’d have with Hermes later.

“Nothing wrong with that.” Achilles’ fingers through his hair were making Zag even sleepier, and he let his eyes close just for a second.

“Wanna kiss you more, though.”

“Kiss me when we wake up.”

We? Oh, that was sort of nice, wasn’t it?

— — —

When Zagreus woke, Achilles was still asleep.

And there was a little (reportedly) demonic dog chewing on Achilles’ hair.

Huh. Maybe Onion *was* out to get Achilles.

Zagreus tried to shoo the dog away without waking Achilles, but the other two dogs got up and left when Zagreus warded off the chihuahua, which made enough noise that Achilles couldn’t possibly sleep through it. He stirred, tucking his face into Zagreus’ shoulder as he yawned.

True to his word, Achilles kissed him when he woke up. Then Achilles didn't *stop* kissing him. Then, Achilles let Zagreus work both of them up all over again, their lazy afternoon quickly turning into grinding on Achilles' couch like a couple of teenagers.

Achilles unzipped Zag's jeans and it was all over from there.

— — —

"What did you get up to on your date?" Hermes asked him the next day, as predicted.

"I had a goddamn good time, that's what," Zagreus replied.

— Week 13 —

The season for holiday shopping had arrived, and the bookshop was decorated in its usual cheery, charming way. Zagreus had been outside hanging lights for almost an entire shift, which was a fun break from the usual.

The season for final exams had also arrived, and Zagreus had a textbook behind the register again, although the shop was busy enough that study/working wasn't really going all that well for him.

He was finishing up a phone call ("no, we don't have that in stock, that book's out of print, maybe try the used bookshop?") when he turned around to spot a familiar face behind the register.

The counter was tall enough that Pyrrhus was just a little curly head peeking over, but he plopped a volume on the counter, a series of autobiographical essays from well-known women throughout history.

"That's for my mom," he explained. "That's why it's a boring one."

"Your mom's not a big fan of space dinosaurs, I see," Zagreus said, ringing him up while trying not to act like he was looking around for Achilles. When he gave Pyrrhus the total, he started counting off exact change from the little spider-man wallet he had in his backpack.

Only after Pyrrhus left the register did Achilles appear, poking his head into the little nook behind the register where they kept the gift-wrapping supplies, because Zagreus had offered to wrap the book and Pyrrhus said yes, but only if he put a bow on the front.

"He wanted to do his own shopping," Achilles explained, looking over his shoulder as Pyrrhus scampered off to the kids' section. "How are you?"

"Studying for your exam," Zagreus replied.

"I said 'how are you'," Achilles said. "That's not really an answer."

"Exhausted," he amended. "Gimme a hug, I need it."

Achilles followed through on that request without hesitation. He'd been wearing a new cologne recently, a spicy scent that was sort of cinnamon-y without smelling overwhelming, and it made Zagreus want to bury his face in him and never leave.

"I have a present for you," Achilles said. "After finals are over."

"Mm?"

"You mentioned wanting to go dancing—I found a place. Whenever you like, let me take you out for the evening."

He was such a romantic like this. Going dancing, saying he'd take Zagreus out for the evening like he was some kind of classic gentleman. He'd been gifting Zagreus poetry, little snatches left on notecards and receipts that he found on his register while he was working—when Zagreus googled said poetry he found nothing, so he had to assume Achilles was writing it.

"That sounds nice," he said. "Hey, I've been meaning to ask you something."

They parted, Achilles letting Zag get back to wrapping the book. Thank god books were the easiest shape in the world to gift-wrap. "What's that?"

"In Pat's book," Zagreus said. "Is the main character actually based on you?"

Achilles laughed, shaking his head. "He tells me it's not. I don't believe him, though. You should ask for me, maybe he'll be honest with you."

"This is what I like about the two of you," Zagreus said, handing the wrapped book to Achilles. "There's always something to find out."

"Funny," Achilles said. "I was going to say the same for you."

Achilles left the bookshop wishing Zagreus luck on his finals, *"not that you'll need it, you've been working hard."* As the bell over the door rang and he herded Pyrrhus out, Zagreus watched him go and wondered, not for the first time, at how lucky he was that something had drawn them together.

Author's Note:

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